

# The Big Gap Remains: Public Librarians as Authors in LIS Journals, 1999-2003

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**ABSTRACT.** Public librarians do not publish as regularly in LIS literature as do library school faculty and academic librarians, whose positions often require them to contribute and who consequently dominate the literature. Using content analysis, this study identifies North American public librarians who have contributed to LIS literature within a five-year period, from 1999 to 2003, and explores where they were situated, how many were male or female, how many collaborated with other authors, and how many contributed more than twice. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Research, public library research, academic research, content analysis

## BACKGROUND

Public librarians, by virtue of their position in the LIS field, have “insights and experiences of value to others in the greater library commu-

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nity” (Chapman & Pike, 1993, p. 60). They do not, however, publish as regularly as do library school faculty and academic librarians, whose positions often require them to contribute to LIS literature, and who consequently dominate that literature. Based on the assumption that it would be of value to the profession as a whole if more public librarians published, this study consists of a content analysis of American and Canadian LIS literature, which seeks to identify the number, gender, and location of public librarians who contributed to this literature between 1999 and 2003. It also identifies those public librarians who contributed to the literature at least twice in that period. The study fills a gap in an existing literature stream by building upon and updating earlier research from the 1980s and early 1990s.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The 1980s and early 1990s saw the appearance of several studies of LIS literature using content analysis. This study follows a model adopted by Chapman and Pike (1993), who examined the level of scholarly contributions made by public librarians to “national” (i.e., American) library science periodicals from 1988-1990. Chapman and Pike modeled their own study after several others of similar scope (Watson, 1985; Buttlar, 1991; Olsgaard & Olsgaard, 1980; Williamson, 1989; Zamora & Adamson, 1982; Swigger, 1985; Mularski, 1991); but Chapman and Pike’s study differed from its predecessors by focusing specifically on the contributions of public librarians within the larger context (i.e., the other researchers profiled either the contributors to certain periodicals or certain categories of contributor, e.g., academic librarians or library school faculty) (Chapman & Pike, pp. 48-49).

More recently, Hersberger and Demas (2001) performed a content analysis of a selection of LIS literature from 1996 to 2000 to identify how frequently “public libraries” arose as a topic in research articles—irrespective of whether the author was a public librarian or not. Although having a slightly different focus, the Hersberger and Dumas (2001) study speaks to the supposed “gap” between “what research is published and what practitioners need to know” (p. 14). Thus while Hersberger and Dumas (2001)—although having some interest in author affiliation—emphasize “what” is published, Chapman and Pike (1993) were interested in “who” published (on whatever topic), the assumption being that people are more likely to write about “what they know” or what their surroundings inspire. The present study updates and expands

the work of Chapman and Pike (1993) and is based on the same assumption.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The following research questions were addressed through a survey of North American LIS literature from 1999-2003:

- How many contributors to North American LIS literature between January 1999 and December 2003 were public librarians?
- Of those, how many published more than once?
- Where were these individuals working when they published?
- How many were women and how many were men? (It is understood that there are difficulties in interpreting this information based on published first names when first names are not always provided and when some first names apply to either sex. Nevertheless, in spite of methodological limitations, the author was sufficiently interested in this statistical information to make an attempt, as Chapman and Pike's study revealed a greater proportion of male public librarians who contributed to the literature than female. This is an interesting finding in light of the fact that male librarians are a minority in the profession.)
- How many were single authors?
- How many collaborated with other authors?
- In the event of collaboration, how many were lead authors?

Operational terms:

- "North American LIS journals": 1. (GENERAL category): For continuity, seven of the eight journals analyzed by Chapman and Pike were used in this study: *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology (JASIST)*, *Information Technology and Libraries*, *Library Quarterly*, *Library and Information Science Research*, *Library Resources and Technical Services*, *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, and *Library Trends*. Eliminated was *Libraries and Culture*, which skewed Chapman and Pike's results in that the journal does not routinely list each author's affiliation; as a result, they recorded a large number of "unknowns." Added to this category was *Feliciter*, the publication of the Canadian Library Association, and the *Canadian*

*Journal of Information & Library Science*. Chapman and Pike based their choice of these journals on a survey of Association of Research Library directors (Kohl & Davis, 1985) which identified the “fifteen most prestigious library periodicals.” They eliminated those that did not typically contain scholarly articles, as well as those that did “not include public librarians among their targeted audience” (2003, p. 49). The remaining journals are widely available and read in North America and using the same journals as Chapman and Pike makes consistent comparisons between studies more likely. *Feliciter* and the *Canadian Journal of Information & Library Science* were introduced to broaden the scope of the study to include specifically Canadian authors and Canadian publications. 2. (PUBLIC LIBRARY or “PUBLIB” category): The same two public library-oriented journals were used for the current study: *Public Libraries* and *Public Library Quarterly*. Again, Chapman and Pike make a good case for these choices, noting that although *Public Libraries* is a less scholarly publication, “the issues examined did contain articles which could be used in the study” (2003, p. 49). Their study revealed significantly higher numbers of public librarian contributions to these journals as compared to those in the GENERAL category and, again, consistency is useful for comparisons between then and now.

- “Articles”: Following Chapman and Pike, these are defined as “presentations of research, theoretical or empirical; analyses of issues, trends, or problems; or any other type of scholarly work. . . . Does not include committee reports, news reports, regular columns or features (unless they are clearly based on background research), opinion pieces, interviews, or any other short informational item. Bibliographies are considered articles if the entries are annotated” (Chapman & Pike, p. 50). Again, the working definitions proposed by Chapman and Pike were preserved for solidity and to make the updated results more easily comparable to the 1993 study. As a general guideline, submissions most easily defined as “articles” for this content analysis contained literature reviews and references.

Data were collected from January 1999 to December 2003, a five-year period. Chapman and Pike only analyzed three years of the literature. In doing so, they identified only two public librarians in the GENERAL category and four in the PUBLIB category who had contributed more than once. The current study expanded the time frame in

question, with a view to identifying larger numbers of public librarian authors. This increased time span also helped to fill the time gap between Chapman and Pike's 1993 article and today.

For each contributor, the following data elements were collected: journal title and year, contributor's name, gender (based on first names, where possible), position (Librarian, Library school faculty or student, Other, Other faculty, Unspecified or Unknown), institution (College/university, Public library, National library, School, Government agency, Other, Unspecified), and geographic location. These were recorded as at the time of publication, not at present (in the event, for example, that people moved from public librarianship to academic or vice versa). The study preserved the four American geographic zones delineated by Chapman and Pike (Northeast, South, Midwest, West)<sup>1</sup> and added Eastern Canada (Maritimes and Newfoundland), Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec), Western Canada (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia, and Northern Canada (Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut). "Foreign" contributors had their location listed as "Other." Two other pieces of data were of interest: collaboration and principal authors, as among the known factors that discourage a writer is a sense of isolation. Interestingly, Chapman and Pike found a greater propensity among public librarians to write as solo authors (p. 59). Data on public librarians' level of activity was also tracked, i.e., how many articles over the five-year period. As noted above, Chapman and Pike did not identify very many public librarians who made multiple contributions (1.9% or 2 people in the GENERAL category and 26.6% or 4 people in the PUBLIC LIBRARY category).

## **RESULTS**

### ***Authorship in LIS Literature***

Some 1,362 articles were published in those journals included in the GENERAL category, with 2,143 authors contributing, either independently or as collaborators.<sup>2</sup> Of these, only 56 individuals, or 3%, were employed in public libraries (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of contributors were situated in colleges and universities, either as LIS faculty, students, other faculty or academic librarians (see Table 2). Some 1,819 or 85% of journal authors in the GENERAL category were situated in an academic environment, up from 78% in the Chapman and Pike study

TABLE 1. Contributors by Institution Type

	GENERAL		PUBLIB	
	N	% of Total	N	% of Total
College/University	1819	85%	118	40%
Public Library	56	3%	94	32%
National Library	20	1%	4	1%
School	2	0%	3	1%
Govt. Agency	27	1%	9	3%
Other	153	7%	40	14%
Unspecified/Unknown	66	3%	24	8%
Total	2143	100%	292	100%

TABLE 2. Contributors by Position

	GENERAL		PUBLIB	
	N	% of Total	N	% of Total
Library Staff	524	24%	130	45%
Library School*	805	38%	70	24%
Other Faculty	406	19%	4	1%
Other	110	5%	35	12%
Unknown/Unspecified	298	14%	53	18%
Total	2143	100%	292	100%

\*Library School Faculty or Students

(p. 52, Table 2). Of these, almost half (44%) were LIS faculty or students.

*JASIST* is far and away the largest publisher of scholarly articles on information science. Out of 1,011 authors, which is almost five times the number of the nearest “competitor” (*Library Trends*, with 220), fully 86% of authors were in an academic environment, and not a single public librarian appeared in this literature base. It is worth noting, though, that if the *JASIST* data are removed, the overall picture remains almost the same: 85% of contributors in the GENERAL category were in an academic environment.

As expected, in the PUBLIC LIBRARY category the prevalence of public librarians among the total number of authors is higher than in the GENERAL category. This is particularly evident in *Public Libraries*, the only journal among those selected to feature more public librarians (44%) as authors than academic contributors (33%). Public librarians do not figure in *Public Library Quarterly* to the same extent that they do in *Public Libraries*. Public librarians make up 14% of authors contributing to this journal, compared to contributors from an academic environment at 52%. The authors conclude by discussing some of the implications of their findings.

### ***Public Librarian Authorship by Gender and Level of Collaboration***

Chapman and Pike (2003) profiled the gender of all contributors to the LIS literature in the period of their study, and offered a comparison to the same data among public librarian contributors. The present study collected similar data for all contributors and is presented in Table 3.

In the GENERAL data set, male contributors outpace female contributors by 6%, compared to 4% (47% male, 43% female) in the 1993 study. In the PUBLIC LIBRARY data set, females outpace males by some 19%, a huge difference from Chapman and Pike's split of 49% male to 48% female (p. 53, Table 3). The data in Table 3 reflect the gender of all contributors. Focusing specifically on public librarians (see Table 4), of 150 contributions, fully 101 or 67% were made by women. This, again, is a substantial change from when Chapman and Pike conducted their study. When they focused their interest on public librarians specifically, here again they noticed an even split, with both males and females registering 49%.

In terms of levels of collaboration, Chapman and Pike observed that most public librarian contributors, either male or female, prefer to write without co-authors. The current study confirms this finding (see Tables 5A and 5B).

Articles in the GENERAL data set were more likely to be written by multiple authors than in the PUBLIC LIBRARY data set. In fact, in the GENERAL data set, contributors who collaborated as lead or secondary authors outnumber those single authors, irrespective of gender. In the PUBLIC LIBRARY data set, however, the situation is reversed: more authors contributed as single authors than as lead or secondary authors with other people. Among public librarians specifically, this trend is even more pronounced, with 63% of women contributors working alone and 76% of male contributors working alone.

TABLE 3. Contributors by Gender

	GENERAL		PUBLIB	
	N	% of Total	N	% of Total
Male	958	45%	108	37%
Female	834	39%	164	56%
Unknown	351	16%	20	7%
Total	2143	100%	292	100%

TABLE 4. Contributors by Gender Among Public Librarians

	N	% of Total
Male	42	28%
Female	101	67%
Unknown	7	5%
Total	150	100%

TABLE 5A. Levels of Collaboration by Gender (All Contributors)

	GENERAL						PUBLIB					
	Female		Male		Unknown		Female		Male		Unknown	
	N	% of Total	N	% of Total	N	% of Total	N	% of Total	N	% of Total	N	% of Total
S	357	43%	357	37%	74	21%	91	55%	65	60%	8	40%
M-L	211	25%	255	27%	104	30%	37	23%	15	14%	7	35%
M-S	266	32%	346	36%	173	49%	36	22%	28	26%	5	25%
Total	834	100%	958	100%	351	100%	164	100%	108	100%	20	100%

TABLE 5B. Levels of Collaboration Among Public Librarians

	Female		Male		Unknown	
	N	% of Total	N	% of Total	N	% of Total
S	64	63%	32	76%	4	57%
M-L	13	13%	3	7%	1	14%
M-S	24	24%	7	17%	2	29%
Total	101	100%	42	100%	7	100%



### ***Authorship by Location***

Chapman and Pike found that the regional home to the single largest number of contributors was the Southern United States. The current study confirms the South as the source of the greatest number of contributors to the LIS literature. It also underscores increased presence of foreign contributions to the literature. In 1993, the “foreign” category accounted for 18% of contributions in the GENERAL and PUBLIC LIBRARY data sets combined. At that time, Canadian contributions were included in the foreign category. Today, the proportion of non-American authorship rises to 32%, if Canadians are combined with “Other” contributors. By themselves, Canadian contributors account for 11% of contributions in the combined data sets (see Table 6A).

The greatest proportion of public librarian contributors came from the Midwestern USA, as shown in Table 6B. This finding was the same in 1993. In Canada, more than double the number of public librarians from Western Canada contributed to the literature between 1999-2003 than from anywhere else in the country.

### ***Multiple Contributions by Individual Authors***

One of the goals of this study was to identify public librarians who are prolific in the LIS literature, with “prolific” defined as publishing twice or more in a five-year period. Table 7 identifies 11 individual authors who published at least twice in this period. As shown in Table 7, only one author contributed more than twice (three times) and the majority of multiple contributors were men. Of 23 articles from repeat authors, seven were from Canada.

## ***DISCUSSION***

The results of this study reaffirm the findings of Chapman and Pike and their predecessors that public librarians constitute a small proportion of contributors to the stated LIS literature at 3% in the GENERAL data set and 6% overall. They also confirm another key finding, that academics dominate the literature in this field, the one exception being in *Public Libraries*. Here contributors who listed public libraries as their institutional affiliation outnumbered academics 78 to 59.

An interesting finding in the GENERAL category is the position of *Feliciter* as the publisher with the highest proportion of public librarians

TABLE 6A. Contributors by Location (All)

Country	Region	GENERAL		PUBLIB	
		N	% of Total	N	% of Total
CAN	Atlantic	29	1%	0	0%
	Ont/Que	158	7%	6	2%
	West	63	3%	6	2%
	North	0	0%	0	0%
USA	Northeast	347	16%	50	17%
	Midwest	357	17%	48	16%
	South	505	24%	100	34%
	West	197	9%	34	12%
OTHER		393	18%	21	7%
UNKNOWN		94	4%	27	9%
TOTAL		2143	100%	292	100%

TABLE 6B. Contributors by Location (Public Librarians)

Country	Region	N	% of Total
CAN	Atlantic	0	0%
	Ont/Que	6	4%
	West	14	9%
	North	0	0%
USA	NorthEast	24	16%
	Midwest	40	27%
	South	32	21%
	West	32	21%
OTHER		2	1%
TOTAL		150	100%

as authors, at 15% (15 out of 103 authors). The next closest after *Feliciter* was *Reference and User Services Quarterly* at 9%. In a very general journal such as *Feliciter*, many articles were left aside from the data set because they did not meet the specific criteria in the definition of “article” as used here. Even though public librarians authored these pieces and were “lost” for this reason, *Feliciter* still has an impressive showing compared to its American counterparts. It also stands in contrast to the *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, which contained not a single article by public librarians.

TABLE 7. Multiple Contributions by Public Librarians

Author	Articles	GENERAL	PUBLIB	Gender	Location
1	2		2	M	MW
2	2		2	Unknown	SOUTH
3	3	3		M	W-CAN
4	2	1	1	M	SOUTH
5	2		2	F	NE
6	2	2		F	W-CAN
7	2		2	F	MW
8	2	1	1	M	MW
9	2	1	1	M	ONT/QUE
10	2		2	M	NE
11	2	2		M	SOUTH
Total	23	10	13		

One observation that can be made about the PUBLIC LIBRARY category is that *Public Libraries* does an excellent job of attracting contributors from public libraries, and the other journals may have something to learn from this journal if they wish to attract more. Fully 44% of *Public Libraries* authors between 1999 and 2003 came from public libraries. Although it is not known whether public librarians are more likely to subscribe to *Public Libraries* than any of the other journals, it may be appropriate for LIS journal editors to study what it is about this journal that public librarians find attractive, i.e., if it is partly the preponderance of articles written by public librarians, then perhaps the other journals would be able to attract more readers by broadening their contributor base.

In terms of articles co-authored with others, little can be said definitively about differences in collaboration rates between men and women. Public librarians, however, appear more inclined to work alone than contributors from other backgrounds. In the GENERAL data set, for example, only 37% of men made single-author contributions to the literature; but looking at public librarians specifically, fully 76% of male authors made single-author contributions. This is the starkest contrast, however, the same is true of women. While 43% of women contributors to the GENERAL journals submitted single-author works, some 63% of women public librarians did the same. Public librarians may prefer to work alone and to submit to specialized journals such as *Public Libraries*. Another thought is that perhaps the journals in the GENERAL cate-

gory are more receptive to submissions from academics. If this is so, public librarians might have a better chance of publishing in these journals if they collaborate with academics.

That most public librarian contributors are female (67%) is an interesting change from Chapman and Pike's findings of an almost even split. In the PUBLIC LIBRARY category, women contributed 56% of articles between 1999 and 2003. Still, in the GENERAL category, women contributors were in the minority at 39%. Given that the number of authors in the GENERAL category is at least seven times what it is in the PUBLIC LIBRARY category, this percentage should be of concern as an indicator that women are not contributing to the literature in numbers reflective of their numerical dominance of the field. Another area related to gender breakdown in this study that attracts notice is the dominance of males among multiple contributors (seven out of eleven, with one unknown).

The ranking of zones designating public librarians' physical location has changed since Chapman and Pike's study was published, however not significantly. Of greater interest, particularly to Canadians, is the total absence of Maritime and Northern public librarians from the pages of LIS literature, especially from *Feliciter*, the Canadian journal.

### CONCLUSION

Although a few changes have occurred since Chapman and Pike's 1993 study, for the most part, public librarians remain very limited in their contributions to this particular subset of the LIS literature. If we accept the assumption that it would be of value to the library profession as a whole if more public librarians published about their workplaces, their experiences, or their perspectives on events and trends in the profession, then this study raises more questions than it answers. Our analysis of a particular type of contribution to a particular form of professional publication suggests several fruitful directions for additional research.

First, if we agree that it is important for public library professionals to contribute to the scholarly research literature, it would be important to study what motivates—and how best to encourage—professional writing among this segment of the profession, particularly in the absence of monetary gain or external pressure to publish such as that imposed on academics. A study of public librarians contributing to the scholarly literature could help to identify factors that these authors believe encouraged them to publish and those (if any) that created difficulty. Analysis

of their responses could reveal ways that public library administrators and LIS journal editors could support public librarians interested in contributing to this literature, and could identify some of the advantages and disadvantages to the professional of working with an academic co-author.

More fundamentally, however, further study could challenge the assumption that it is beneficial for public librarians to contribute to publications dominated by academics. Two broad sets of research questions are suggested. On the one hand, a study of the professional information seeking of public librarians and other stakeholders could help public librarians choose their publication venues most effectively to reach their desired audiences, and could answer questions such as: What communication venues should public librarians target if they wish to reach other practitioners? Academics? Funders and policymakers? What forms of communication are used frequently and readily by the desired audiences?

On the other hand, our definition of “article” eliminates exactly the short pieces, columns, and presentations at professional conferences that public library staff may see as more accessible and more professionally rewarding than lengthier research articles. Further study of public librarians’ contributions to, and perspectives on, a variety of forms of professional communication could determine whether there are publication forms or venues for which staff receive greater institutional or financial support, or that result in greater professional gains.

Our findings on the gender of published authors suggest that it would be useful to study women’s and men’s perspectives on advancement opportunities, competing demands on their free time, and institutional support for publishing, perhaps within librarianship and other professions.

In all, this study represents a small first step in addressing the extremely complex question of how public librarians can communicate their professional insights and experiences with peers, academics, and policymakers.

## NOTES

1. Northeast: CT, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT; South: AL, AR, DC, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, VA, WV; Midwest: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI; West: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY.

2. The real number of contributors (as collaborators) is higher than shown, because data were collected for the first *three* authors only. In *JASIST*, seven authors would not be uncommon, however, only the first three were counted.

3. The actual title “librarian” or “public librarian” was not always used. Individuals identified as working in a public library were assumed to be librarians. For this reason, the number of contributors identified as “public librarians” throughout this article have this status ascribed to them by virtue of the type of institution in which they were employed.

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